

AMERICAN PSYCHO

BRET EASTON ELLIS' AMERICA



A 52' documentary
Produced by ARTE France & SQUAWK
Directed by Jean-Christophe KLOTZ

DELIVERY: JULY 2021

AMERICAN PSYCHO

BRET EASTON ELLIS' AMERICA

PITCH

American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis is one of those scandalous novels that are pilloried at the time of their release, and whose qualities only become clear later, when time finally allows us to realize how right its author was.

Bret Easton Ellis portrays Patrick Bateman, a young Wall Street investment banker by day and a serial killer by night. The violence and the crudity of the description of his murders deeply shocked the readers, not to mention the racist, homophobic, misogynistic rantings, the hatred of the poor or even of children that the author imposes without restraint through the words of his character.

Death threats received by the author, calls for a boycott from feminist movements, cancellation of promotional tours, complete trashing by the critics (with very rare exceptions such as Norman Mailer or John Irving), the release of Bret Easton Ellis' novel in 1991, then its destiny to become a classic, twice adapted for film and then in the form of a Broadway musical, is a real novel in itself.

A novel that tells us about politics, money, sexuality, capitalist frenzy, overconsumption, and finally about today's America in the context of the decline of the West.

Thirty years after its release, we have to admit that on many points, Ellis was right. The sub-prime crisis, the normalization of mass murders, the rise of white supremacists all the way to the White House, the apparent emergence of anti-women hate movements, all of which are treated in the book in the form of obscene exaggerations. Unfortunately, what was a prediction in the novel is no longer so. This is it.

This film does not seek to offer a critical analysis of Bret Easton Ellis' novel. It is rather about conducting a real investigation on the American psyche, starting from the story of the destiny of this deeply disturbing work, with one question as a guideline:

What are Bret Easton Ellis and his American Psycho all about?

SYNOPSIS

Reading American Psycho remains today an ordeal, in the physical sense, as the text oscillates between literary logorrhoea and obscenity. Accused at the time of being a monster himself for daring to write such scenes of horror, Bret Easton Ellis, who was only 26 years old at the time, quite pertinently recalled that it seemed to him that “any American who has been to school is supposed to know the difference between an author and his character. Patrick Bateman is the monster, not me. Bateman is not the only monster, one might add. The society in which he evolves is itself monstrous. On several occasions, Bateman cries out for help to those around him, regularly declaring in all sincerity that he is sick, that he is a psychopathic killer. But in a kind of collective denial, no one wants to hear it.

An upper class neighborhood in the heights of Los Angeles. It is with a certain apprehension that we go to meet the author of American Psycho, Bret Easton Ellis.

When reading his work, one expects to meet the king of provocation, one of those narcissistic and perverse writers who make it a point of honor never to follow the rules of a filmed interview.

Surprise. The man is rather affable, funny, and appropriate. Even if during the interview that structures the film, we start to detect some of his strategic postures. Ellis often feigns innocence, for example, declaring himself very surprised at how shocking American Psycho was. It was for him to conduct an experimental writing, hence this obsessive style, with its miles of brand names and name-dropping, which fits perfectly with the character's madness. He never thought that his book would have such an impact. What he wanted above all was to express himself with absolute freedom.

Flash-back...

We are plunged into the eighties. Flashy colors, wispy hairstyles, disco music... On archive images, we discover the scandal that accompanied the release of the novel. The prestigious publishing house Simon and Schuster has just announced its decision not to release the book. Bret Easton Ellis decides to keep the \$300,000 advance he has already received. The publisher Random House takes over, arousing the anger of feminist groups led by Tammy Bruce, then 28 years old. Tammy Bruce and other prominent feminists who followed her (Gloria Steinem, Kate Millett...) tell us what happened next: their call for a boycott of Random House, the setting up of a hotline to collect complaints from all those who feel offended by the novel. And there are many of them! The switchboard is overloaded: women, African-Americans, gays, ethnic minorities, animal rights activists... It must be said that everyone gets their due in American Psycho.

At the time, most of the literary critics condemned it, with rare exceptions such as Norman Mailer and John Irving. Thirty years later, the author of one of these incendiary reviews, Roger Cohen, of the NY Times, still wonders about the success of the book and recognizes that it was able to get to the bottom of something very accurate. No doubt the emptiness of an era. But for all that, did the writing itself have to embrace this superficiality? For John Irving, one may not like the style, the violence of the text. But isn't it above all the era that is violent?

Bret Easton Ellis looks back on these weeks of madness, which were not to his displeasure, he who has never ceased to castigate the politically correct. But things quickly got out of hand. The author receives death threats, he is forced to hire a bodyguard ... The experience has deeply marked him, and has triggered an introspection that he would probably not have bothered to undertake without it. Bret Easton Ellis confides to us: Patrick Bateman is the strongest character I have invented. I am haunted by him, he follows me everywhere, I have no control over it, I can't stop thinking about it. I mean, everybody talks to me about it all the time - people say, what happened to him? Bateman reflects the feeling I had at that time of being lost in the world, of not understanding anything, of drifting like a wreck in a crazy world. The way I got rid of that feeling was by writing the book. I feel like I really became an adult after writing this novel.

We now enter one of the emblematic places of the novel, a restaurant in Manhattan, hyper-trendy at the time... Today, the look has softened. The owner has gained weight compared to the photos of the 90's where he proudly poses next to a triumphant Bret Easton Ellis. Sitting at one of the tables, in an impeccable suit, but dated from the 80s, a former Wall Street trader starts reading a section of American Psycho.

Other readings will punctuate the story. They will be given by other former traders, more or less “repented”, typically the kind of characters who could have been Bret Easton Ellis’ Patrick Bateman. They tell us in their own way about “those crazy years”. Some of them have learned from it, others not, like this former French trader living in New York who concludes our interview with a “Change the world? What for?”...



Back to Bret Easton Ellis. He talks about his view of today's America. A country disoriented, abandoned, like his character Patrick Bateman. He is amused to think that he has experienced, as if live, the beginning of the decline of the American Empire. A beginning that he places precisely in the 80's, with the advent of the society of the entertainment announced 20 years earlier by Guy Debord... Meeting with Kaiama L. Glover, a woman who is a professor of literature at Columbia University (New-York), and who underlines the visionary aspect of American Psycho. We realize that many of the outrages of the text are unfortunately true today: the rise of white supremacy, homophobia, misogyny... Don't profiles like that of Jeffrey Epstein, the former trader who became a multimillionaire and who turned out to be a terrifying sexual predator, correspond to the main character of American Psycho?

Of course, he did not go so far as to cut up his victims with a chainsaw, but how many lives did he ruin to satisfy his perversion and that of his accomplices?

Sébastien Dieguez is a researcher in neuroscience at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland). He has taken a close interest in the character of Patrick Bateman as part of his work on psychopaths. For us, he undertakes a quick diagnosis of the character, who ticks all the boxes of the narcissistic serial killer in Robert Hare's Psychopathy Checklist. This is an evaluation tool developed by a Canadian psychologist, and used by the justice system to evaluate the degree of psychopathy of an individual. But what is most disturbing is the parallel Dieguez draws with what he calls “corporate psychopaths”, who manage to integrate into society and hold positions of responsibility. Based on research conducted in 2010 with 203 corporate executives who agreed to take Hare's test, Sebastian Dieguez realized that 20 of them, who held positions of great responsibility, had scores higher than the average incarcerated criminal... As if these successful psychopaths managed to find legal loopholes. Their strong suit is to maintain the mask of normality under all circumstances, as Patrick Bateman does. And not to learn anything from their actions.

The comparison with capitalist predation is tempting... We bring Bret Easton Ellis on this territory. Is American society, Western society as a whole, capable of learning from its increasingly frequent and violent crises?

Back to the 80s. Black and white photos testify to the unbridled lifestyle of the white, wealthy youth of New York.

Sleepless nights at the Area, one of the great emblematic clubs of the time, cocaine, alcohol... We recognize Bret Easton Ellis, surrounded by superb creatures, men and women. We see Andy Warhol passing by... It's the time of the "Brat Pack", an informal group of young writers, quickly elevated to the rank of literary stars thanks to their innovative novels. Around Ellis, we can see Jay McInerney, Jill Eisenstadt, Tama Janowitz... Thirty years later, we meet again some of the members of the group. If Jay McInerney admires Bret's audacity and his real talent as a writer, he does not always share his need to provoke, to "impress the bourgeois"... But he reminds us that the violence of Ellis's text is only the reflection, the metaphor of an American society where violence, omnipresent, is covered with the veil of a puritanism which does not deceive anyone anymore. As for Jill Eisenstadt, she confides to us that she did not feel comfortable with the image that the press at the time gave of her: that of the sexy girl of the group. She ironizes on the fact that within the same newspapers, whereas the literary critics were degrading their novels, the celebrity magazines were making a big fuss about their nocturnal escapades... The discussion gradually turns to the accusations of misogyny and sexism against Ellis. Which he denies. We feel he is tired of answering the same accusations for almost thirty years: "You will always have sexist, racist, xenophobic people, it is in human nature, argues Ellis. I'm not here to lecture them, I write fiction, I use what I see (...) What I see today is that everyone is trying to put on the victim costume... And nobody talks to anybody anymore... Everyone has locked themselves into their posture, and there is no getting out of it..."

Ellis repeats that he is neither sexist nor misogynist. American Psycho is precisely a denunciation of the contempt for women so widespread among the American male... The best proof, he concludes, is that the novel has been adapted for film by two women who understood that it was a satire, who knew how to exploit the black humor of the novel.



Images from the American Psycho making-of, the 1998 film directed by Canadian Mary Harron based on an adaptation written by Guinevere Turner.

We wonder why the film did not provoke as many violent reactions as the novel. A rather paradoxical situation, as one would imagine that the realism of the image is more difficult to stand than a representation through writing alone... Would Hollywood be more permissive than the world of literary publishing?

We will ask our different interlocutors if they think that Bret Easton Ellis' novel could still be published today... Bret Easton Ellis, for his part, thinks not. At issue is the advent of political correctness, which seems to him to be the main problem in American society today.

The reading of a new section, particularly graphic, reminds us of the sulphurous dimension of the novel. It is the detailed description of one of the murders committed by Patrick Bateman. Bret explains that he didn't want to forbid himself anything - metaphorically, of course. But he regrets that too many people have retained the violence and pornography, when for him it is above all the story of a young man who cannot find his place in a society whose values he basically detests.



Meeting with Pierre Bayard, professor of literature and... psychoanalyst.

We asked Pierre Bayard to reread the novel for us. His attentive rereading of American Psycho allows us to draw new threads. This sequence will also allow us to underline the different writing devices used by Ellis, some of which are extremely sophisticated. For example, the novel sometimes makes use of a certain confusion of identities. Some characters suddenly change their names. Others are regularly mistaken with someone else. Finally, while the story is mostly told in the first person, it suddenly shifts to the third person for a sequence, supporting the idea that the murders described may only exist in Bateman's head... And then there is the recurring figure of Donald Trump, who keeps coming back in the book, as a kind of model for Bateman, a father figure... "Would you have liked to have a father like Donald Trump?... "

During this sequence we will try to make him talk about his father, from whom he says he was inspired for Patrick Bateman... - it must not have pleased him", we risk. -The retort is: "Anyone who writes to please his parents is in trouble in literature!"

Bret Easton Ellis talks about the deep boredom he experienced as a child and teenager in a fundamentally mundane family and social environment, where there were no significant events to take hold. Yes, he felt different. Yes, he felt homosexual, but he never really suffered from it. His parents gave him a lot of freedom, he really has nothing specific to reproach them with... Except boredom, maybe. While researching for American Psycho, Ellis was very interested in serial killers... and also in Wall Street traders. He explains that at the time, many of those he met admired Trump. He found it interesting to bring that into the story. We'll ask him what Donald Trump's career path, from Wall Street to the White House to reality show, says about the state of American society.

New filmed archive. It is an American television program that opens with an elegantly old-fashioned front credit. Judith Martin, alias Miss Manners, is an expert on the rules that define good morals. The sequence seems surreal compared to the tone of the story so far.

Question to Bret Easton Ellis: “Why did you put a quote from Miss Manners at the beginning of *American Psycho*”? The author explains that he found the contrast striking, but that beyond the gag, Miss Manners’ quote is really thought-provoking: “The essential purpose of civilization is to express things in elegant, not aggressive, ways. If we followed all our impulses, we would kill each other”...

We then ask him what he thinks he would have become without literature.

Art, and in general freedom of expression, are essential elements of civilization. However, Ellis denounces, we have arrived at a time when we can no longer say anything without risking to offend such or such category of the population.

In France, Virginie Despentes and Frédéric Beigbeder are big fans of Bret Easton Ellis’ work. Both of them confirm the words of the bad boy of American literature. And they explain why they think he is one of the greatest American authors of his generation. For these authors, the scandal surrounding Bret Easton Ellis’ work is not the important issue. The scandal is only a symptom. It is what he says about American society that is interesting.

If anything, the artist’s role is to be most sincere to himself, to offer a reflection to the society in which he evolves. As we approach the end of the film, we meet again with Kaiama L. Glover, professor of literature at Columbia University. To her, Bret Easton Ellis should not be taken for what he is not, namely a political conscience. There are many great political writers in the history of American literature. Steinbeck, Hemingway, and so many others... But today, the times are so different. The press slams Trump at every turn, whose behavior is far beyond what any fiction writer could have imagined... The problem is that this political-media delirium conceals realities that we end up not seeing anymore, except in sporadic bursts of media coverage: racism, poverty, social exclusion...

These evils do exist in Bret Easton Ellis’ work, but they are as if out of the picture, or they fade into the background, they fade away before the spectacular and scandalous aspect of Bateman’s behavior. In this way, *American Psycho* remains perfectly in tune with its time, even today, thirty years later. This is probably what makes it a classic.

Last reading of a section of *American Psycho*... This is Patrick Bateman’s confession, towards the end of the novel, where he finally gives himself up to the reader who has followed him step by step in his descent into hell: “Is evil something you are? Or is it something you do? “.

Before leaving Bret Easton Ellis, we ask him one last time about what seems to me to be the major absentee of *American Psycho*: love. The absence of any feeling of love is flagrant throughout the story, especially in the scenes of sexual intercourse. During almost the whole story actually, because the word love does appear in the novel, but on page 500, at the very end of the book. We question the author about this absence, which is way too obvious to have been involuntary.

What if the whole novel were to be understood in negative, precisely, by all that it does not say? As an encouragement to the spectator to dive back into this singular work with a fresh eye.



arte DISTRIBUTION

the ultimate reference for factual documentaries



FLORENCE SALA

*Head of
International Distribution
& Marketing*

f-sala@arteFrance.fr



ALEC HERRMANN

*Head of
Catalog and Video
Acquisitions (DVD/VOD)*

a-herrmann@arteFrance.fr



AUDREY KAMGA
Sales Manager

a-kamga@arteFrance.fr

Canada, USA, South America,
Australia, New Zealand,
MENA Region



ISABELLE MONTEIL
Sales Manager

i-monteil@arteFrance.fr

UK, Ireland, Italy, Spain,
Portugal, Asia
language versions



SOPHIE SOGHOMONIAN
Sales Manager

s-soghomonian@arteFrance.fr

Eastern Europe, Russia, Africa
Israel, Greece
worldwide inflight



FRANKA SCHWABE
Sales Manager

f-schwabe@arteFrance.fr

Germany, Austria, Switzerland,
Belgium, France, Netherlands
Scandinavia, Iceland